

MINIMAL RESPONSES

Palfrey, student of 1907, I see
you've left your mark in the margins
of Palgrave's Golden Treasury, expelled
from some towering attic in Cincinnati.
Dutifully, you scrawled: "Read" and "Memorize,"
the definitions of difficult words;
your professor taught you
to identify Pindaric odes,
or told you where to affix the label;
beside a Shakespeare sonnet: "Learn
first stanza for Wed." Page upon page,
starkly minimal responses. Across "A Madrigal"
you worked out an equation. Your major,
math, invaded the margins and inside covers,
overwhelming the Nine Muses you listed.
At the end of "A Dilemma," you scratched Anon. out
and wrote Palfrey in, wit's opportunity.
Beside "and this gives life to thee,"
you noted a similarity: "my poem."
Above "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Shelly -- sunk,"
"Keats -- consumption," "Byron -- battle." Below Cowper's
"The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk": "only
5 more weeks to go and I'm free."
Beside Wordsworth's "Reaper": "I hate poetry!!!"
The death-dealing short-hand of your responses
inspire in me the peevishness you resented
in your nameless professor. But I cannot
shrug off a slight sense of poignance. Time,
too, in your time and still, leaves its stain here.
Palfrey, you scribbled your private graffiti
on pages like public, monumental walls.
The poet's lines are regulated pulses, exultant, elegaic.
yours, drones of tedium, slashes of exasperation.
But I can burn this Golden Treasury
and your mark will vanish.
You have had your say, and they, theirs.

MONUMENTS AT THE LAST MOMENT

Colleoni, you old twilit
son-of-a-bitch, on your high horse
in Campo San Zanipolo where my son
Blake (distant kin to the poet) chooses
a new gelato, where my wife
indulges my romantic scrutiny,
I almost missed you.

Venice, seen and left,
Colleoni in his place,
too dim for home movies.

-- David Madden

Baton Rouge LA

CHINATOWN

To begin with it was purely a tourist gimmick,
a couple of blocks of chinoiserie
in imitation of the Chinatowns of New York
and San Francisco. In fact, it was inhabited
mostly by Yugoslavs.
After a while, though,
for some reason that is hard to understand,
the Chinese actually started moving in.
Maybe developers subsidized them; I don't know.
In the L.A. of those days,
as the movie amply demonstrates,
anything was possible where big bucks were involved.
Today the whole area is Chinese.
And, according to the police,
it truly is a vertex of crime.
Once again, life has imitated art.

TOAD'S WATERLOO

When we finally got a high-class French restaurant
in Long Beach, Dave and Esme Cherin
invited my girl and me there for late desserts.

While the waiter was in the kitchen
I craned my neck towards the pastry cart
and said, "Look, I can never remember
which of these fuckers is which.
Tell me a few of their names
so I won't embarrass myself."

And Dave said. "I don't recognize
any of them except the Napoleons,"
and Esme claims she said, "There aren't any Napoleons
on that cart,"

but I didn't hear her, so when the waiter returned
I said, "I'll take that Napoleon,"